

Bishop Francis Asbury in West Virginia*

By Lawrence Sherwood

Introduction

"Whither am I going? To the New World. What to do? To gain honor? No, if I know my own heart. To get money? No: I am going to live to God, and to bring others so to do."

So Francis Asbury (1745-1816) wrote in his *Journal* on September 12, 1771 as he was starting from England to America. In the next forty-five years he not only was to be the dominant force in the shaping of American Methodism as its pioneer Bishop; he also was to become one of the greatest explorers of the American frontier.

His Journal

Asbury's part in the life of pioneer America and his observations of people and places have been in large measure hidden to recent generations. Asbury kept a daily diary or *Journal* from August 7, 1771 until December 7, 1815. Portions of this *Journal* were published during his life. The entire *Journal* was published in 1821. It was reprinted in 1852, and again reprinted about two years later. It had, thus, by 1958 been out of print for more than a hundred years, and copies had become increasingly difficult to obtain. Little wonder that present-day persons had scant knowledge of his life and importance.

Certain scholars in America knew of his *Journal* and of its meaning not only as a commentary on the beginnings of The Methodist Church, but also as a first-hand record of men and movements in the early days of the United States. Thus, when the National Historical Publications Commission of the United States Government chose sixty-six great Americans whose works should be edited and published, Asbury's name was included. The recommendation that this Commission made in 1961 was accepted by two Presidents and both Houses of Congress.

Through the recommendation and cooperation of the World Methodist Council, the *Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*

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were published by the Association of Methodist Historical Societies in the United States in 1958. The Editor-in-Chief is Dr. Elmer T. Clark; the present writer is one of the Regional Research Editors. The three-volume set of Asbury's works in this standard annotated edition is available for \$21.00 from The Methodist Publishing House, 642 Smithfield Street, Pittsburgh 30, Pennsylvania.

On the Frontier in West Virginia

Asbury traveled where the people were. As the people moved westward, so did Asbury. In the earliest parts of the *Journal* one finds Asbury concentrating on the seaboard of what was to become the United States. Toward the end of his life his interest and travels extended as far west as Indiana.

The epitome of Asbury's constant interest in the edge of civilization can be no better shown than by the shift of emphasis in his travels in what is now West Virginia. Notice how his visits begin in the Eastern Panhandle and then move westward through rather definite phases.

Asbury's first visit to what is now West Virginia was in 1776; in July of this year he visited Berkeley Springs. This was the very year that this town was established, under the name of "Bath."

Asbury was again in West Virginia in 1781, 1782, 1783, and 1784. Each of these visits was in the Eastern Panhandle, westwardly including the present counties of Grant and Mineral. Thus, during the first eight years of Asbury's visits to West Virginia he did not get across the mountains to westward flowing water.

Asbury's first visit in West Virginia that took him across the Alleghany summit was in 1785 when he visited Morgantown. This crossing of the mountains was made, however, through Maryland rather than by a frontal attack over the West Virginia hills.

In 1786 Asbury's tour took him not only to the frontier in West Virginia but also to the frontier of the United States. In this year he visited Coxe's Fort in Brooke County in the Northern Panhandle, and from there he crossed the Ohio River. In

his *Journal* Asbury wrote: "We are now going to the frontiers, and may take a peep into the Indian land." This visit to the Northern Panhandle was an early scouting tour; he did not start regular visits to this area until after the lapse of seventeen years.

In 1788 Asbury began his assault on the mountains, south to north, as he traveled through the "devious lonely wilds." A look at a map of West Virginia shows that this south-north tour was the edge of civilization, west of the mountains that divide the waters of the Atlantic from the waters of the Mississippi. Asbury records that these tours from Monroe County in southeastern West Virginia via Morgantown to Pennsylvania were among the most difficult travels that he ever experienced in the whole of America. He drove himself and his horse over this rough terrain not only in 1788 but also in 1790, 1792, and 1796. In May 1796 he wrote: "I doubt whether I shall ever request any person . . . to accompany me across these mountains again." Asbury kept this resolve, not only because of the difficulties on this frontier, but also because the frontiers had shifted. Between 1796 and 1803 Asbury simply touched the hems of West Virginia (in Monroe and Jefferson Counties) as he toured to meet new problems and situations.

In 1803 Asbury began his long series of visits in the Northern Panhandle of West Virginia. In the thirteen years between 1803 and 1815, Asbury made eleven tours in the Northern Panhandle. One discovers that these tours were not only because of their importance to advancing Methodism in this area; Asbury was also in this section often as he crossed to Ohio and the further advancing frontier.

The only other area visited by Asbury in what is now West Virginia was Parkersburg, in 1810. The occasion of this visit was a Camp Meeting on the Little Kanawha. Although Wood County was now far removed from being the edge of civilization, nonetheless, pioneer conditions are reflected in Asbury's comment about his "toiling through bad roads and accidents at the ferry." His supplication tells much: "Lord, prepare me by Thy grace for the patient endurance of hunger, heat, labour, the clownishness of ignorant piety, the impudence of the impious, unreasonable preachers, and more unreasonable heretics and heresy!"

West Virginia Counties Visited

Asbury made thirty-four tours in West Virginia, starting with his visit at Bath in 1776 and ending with his stay at "John Beck's, West Liberty" in early August, 1815. In these thirty-nine years Asbury visited at least twenty-two of the present counties of West Virginia. Thus, persons interested in ecclesiastical or secular history in these counties may well find comments of interest in the *Journal*.

It is possible that Asbury was in the edge of two more counties; however, the following alphabetical list of counties is practically exhaustive, and is taken from Asbury's own records: Barbour, Berkeley, Brooke, Grant, Greenbrier, Hampshire, Hancock, Hardy, Harrison, Jefferson, Marion, Mineral, Monongalia, Monroe, Morgan, Ohio, Pendleton, Pocahontas, Preston, Randolph, Taylor and Wood.

Places

What is your area of interest in West Virginia history? Chances are that you will find source material in Asbury's documents.

Is your hobby West Virginia Springs? You will find rich material on this subject in Asbury. There is much comment on Berkeley Springs and a lesser amount on Sweet Springs.

If your interest centers about natural curiosities, you will find a common interest with the man Asbury. In his *Journal* you will find the first written description (1781) of Hanging Rocks in Hampshire County; you will find an early description of Iman's Spring in Grant County, now the site of the Spring Run Fish Hatchery near Petersburg, of which Asbury says: "The quantity of water it discharges (is) sufficient for a mill within two hundred yards from the source"; you will find descriptions of caves that are among the earliest published descriptions of this type of natural curiosity in West Virginia.

The descriptions of early towns in West Virginia can not but arouse interest in their present-day inhabitants. Of course, many of Asbury's visits were before towns had any names at all; other visits were during times that present towns had other names; other visits were in private homes on spots that since have become towns. Thus, this listing does not include all of

the present West Virginia towns; nonetheless, the following will perhaps show the wideness of Asbury's travels and interest.

In July 1790 Asbury was riding in Greenbrier and Pocahontas Counties; in his *Journal* he recorded: "On my way I premeditated the sending of a preacher to a newly-settled place in the Kenhaway county." This "newly-settled place" is more commonly called Charleston.

When Asbury visited Lewisburg in July 1790 he called it "Green Brier court house"—and further mentioned that "here some sat as critics and judges." In his quaint way, he mentions Lewisburg in his visit of May 1792 as follows: "We rode through Greenbrier by the town."

As is well known to all students of West Virginia history, the Town of Fort Ashby in Mineral County has had many official names. Asbury adds two more names for this community; in his visit of June 1781 he calls it "Dutch settlement"; in subsequent visits he calls it "Jones"—after the name of the family with whom he visited.

When Asbury visited the present site of Philippi, Barbour County, in July 1788, there was but one cabin there—that of William Anglin's. Asbury's visit in this home was not the most welcome that he ever received: "Near midnight we stopped at William Anglin's, who hissed his dogs at us; but the women were determined to get to quarterly meeting, so we went in. Our supper was tea. . . . I lay on the floor on a few deer skins with the fleas. That night our poor horses got no corn. . . ."

Asbury mentions his visit to Parkersburg, which he calls "Wood's Court House." He had many things to say about Berkeley Springs, among which was a "seat of sin." When he visited Harper's Ferry in May 1795, he wrote: "The impending rocks impress the mind of the traveller with terror; and should they fall would crush him to pieces: this scene is truly awful and romantic." When he was again in Harper's Ferry in August 1801 he noted that he "beheld with satisfaction the good plain buildings erected there by the United States."

And on he goes—visiting towns and often giving his impressions of them—to Martinsburg, Shepherdstown, Clarksburg

Morgantown, Charles Town, Wellsburg, West Liberty, Wheeling. In West Virginia, as in the nation, he "printed the map of his ministry with the hoofs of his horse."

People

Asbury had a great interest in people. He spent all of his life in the homes of others. He was at home with persons of high and low estate. In the section now known as West Virginia he found himself as guest in homes of both those who were famous and those who had been infamous.

Since Asbury's early visits occurred while Indians were still in West Virginia, he came into contact with persons who had been involved with the savages. He came to know Richard Williams, in 1781, who then lived near Romney; in the *Journal* (Volume I, page 464ff) he tells the thrilling story of the capture of Williams by the Indians. In 1788 Asbury visited Clover Lick in Pocahontas County and made reference to the work of Jacob Warwick who had built a fort there and had "made a small estate by keeping cattle, horses, &c., on the range." Asbury visited Coxe's Fort in Brooke County, in 1786, at which time the inhabitants could look across the Ohio River and see Indian lands. He visited in the home of Thomas Drinnon, in Pocahontas County, "whose wife was killed, and his son taken prisoner by the Indians." Asbury was a welcomed visitor at Cook's Fort in Monroe County—for two of the sons of the builder of this fort had become Methodist preachers.

Among the interesting references to the Indian incursions in West Virginia is his comment about the Kinnan massacre in Randolph County. The full story of this massacre may be found in Volume I, Number 1 of *West Virginia History, A Quarterly Magazine*, Charleston, October, 1939; in this publication there is an extensive article by Boyd B. Stutler as well as a reprint of the *True Narrative of the Sufferings of Mary Kinnan*. Asbury was on the spot in May 1792. He writes: "We stopped at Capt. S _____'s, where there were several families crowded together for fear of the Indians. The upper end of the valley has been depopulated, one family has been destroyed since I was last here. . . ."

In addition to his contacts with those who were in the midst of Indian activity, Asbury visited in homes of men who were leaders in their day. Perhaps this can be no better shown than

through Asbury's relationship with men who were members of the Virginia Convention which met in Richmond in June 1788 to ratify or reject the Federal Constitution. As has been often told, there were sixteen members from what is now West Virginia; the fifteen of these who voted to ratify more than made the majority of ten by which Virginia ratified the Constitution. It has been noted that it was the votes from "beyond the mountains" that aided not only Virginia but also other states to accept the Federal Constitution.

Among the sixteen men from West Virginia were the following: Isaac VanMeter from Hardy County, Abel Seymour from Hardy County, Col. George Jackson from Harrison County, Ebenezer Zane from Ohio County, and John Wilson from Randolph County. It is amazing to realize that Francis Asbury was a visitor in the homes and with the families of each of these five men!

Random comments of Asbury concerning the "famous five" include: "I had an attentive, well-behaved congregation at Squire VanMeter's." . . . He rode to Seymour's "as welcome as snow in harvest." . . . "I lodged with Col. Jackson." . . . "At Colonel Zane's, where I lodged, the aged people were kind indeed. . . . I contemplate two chapels; one of forty feet square, and the other of fifty feet; the first in Charlestown (Wellsburg), Alexander Wells to give the lot; and the other in Wheeling, the ground to be bestowed for its erection by Colonel Zane." "I preached at Wilson's. Here many careless people do not hear a sermon more than once in one or two years. . . ."

Asbury was a frequent visitor in many other homes of pioneers and patriots. He was in the home of the Hite family in the Eastern Panhandle from 1781 and after. He preached in the barn of Captain James Stroud near Martinsburg. He preached and baptized at Peter Dewit's in Mineral County—and doubtless heard of Dewit's experiences in the Revolution. He was a welcomed visitor at the home of John Jeremiah Jacob in Hampshire County—little knowing that a son of his host would later be Governor of the State of West Virginia. (See: *West Virginia History, A Quarterly Magazine*, Charleston, 1956, Vol. XVII, No. 2, January, pp. 117-137 for a biography of Jacob.) He found rest and opportunity at the home and church built by Col. Charles Martin on the West

Virginia-Pennsylvania line. He enjoyed his visits with John McNeel at the present site of Hillsboro—and probably thrilled to know that McNeel had come to this fertile area because he thought that he had killed a man “back in civilization,” and had stayed in this lovely spot even after he learned that the man had not died. He looked forward to his visits with “Father” Calder Haymond, at the present site of Fairmont; he must have been overjoyed when Calder’s son, Thomas, became a Methodist Circuit Rider.

Asbury entered a life-long friendship with Dr. Edward Tiffin while Tiffin lived in Charles Town in a house that is still extant. This friendship continued after Tiffin moved to Ohio and became the first Governor of that State.

Time would fail were we to attempt to tell the persons of interest with whom Asbury was friend—John Davenport, a Revolutionary soldier who lived in Jefferson County; John Beck, at whose home near West Liberty Asbury preached his last sermon in West Virginia; John McCullough, sheriff of Ohio County in 1776 and brother of Samuel who gained fame by his leap to escape from the Indians; Joseph Perkins, Asbury’s old “friend and neighbor,” who was the superintendent of the U. S. Armory at Harper’s Ferry; and other names by the score.

In Asbury’s *Journal* there is an almost inexhaustible mine of material for biographical and historical research. The new edition has the greatest amount of identifications and notations that space permitted. In addition to those printed in the *Journal*, the author of this paper has prepared extensive notes on West Virginia persons and places. A copy of this material may be found at the archives of the American Association of Methodist Historical Societies at Lake Junaluska, North Carolina; the author of this paper has another copy.

Conclusion

Asbury speaks to our day not only in the context of religion. He has much information and insight on the places and people of the early days of West Virginia. He lived and labored in a day when the pioneers were “but one remove from the Indians in the comforts of civilized society.” His writings will be of benefit to the local historian or to the person interested in the many facets of life in America between 1771 and 1815. The pioneer Bishop has blazed a long trail.